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Conduits of Power: What the Origins of Japan's Earthquake Catfish Reveal about Religious Geography

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By the nineteenth century, the giant catfish (*namazu*) had become a widely known symbol of earthquakes throughout Japan, as the production of hundreds of varieties of catfish prints (*namazu e*) after the Ansei Edo Earthquake of 1855 indicates. Starting with these prints and moving backward in time, this essay examines the origin and development of the earthquake catfish from its Japanese roots in Chikubushima, an island in Lake Biwa, to its Chinese roots in mythical hybrid creatures and a vast network of powerful mountains, waterways, and islands. This investigation reveals a general approach to apprehending divine power in Japan similar to the operation of a modern electrical power grid. Lakes, rivers, seas, and underground conduits transmit divine power in this grid. Mountains and mountain-like islands serve as the relays and substations, at which transformers such as foundation stones (*kaname ishi*) step cosmic power down to levels suitable for humans. Local deities based at the substations manage the system. This divine power grid linked Japan and China, in part by replicating potent Chinese spaces, especially Penglai. This essay highlights Daoistic elements in Japanese religion that centuries of domestication have obscured.

Keywords: earthquake catfish, catfish prints, Penglai, foundation stone, Chikubushima, Kashima Shrine, Benzaiten, Shinobazu Pond, Tokyo, Urashima cultural zone

A popular anthology of journalistic reporting on the 1855 Ansei Edo Earthquake 安政江戸地震, *Ansei kenmonshi* 安政見聞誌, includes an account of a fisherman named Shinozaki 篠崎. He noticed that catfish, normally lake bottom dwellers, were swimming near the surface and regarded it as a sign of an impending earthquake.¹ Although by this time giant catfish had become a widely recognized symbol of earthquakes, the *Ansei kenmonshi* tale is the earliest known instance of the claim that actual catfish could predict earthquakes. From then to the present, at least some researchers and journalists in

1 AKS 1856, vol. 1, p. 15. See also Arakawa 1982, p. 121.

Japan have maintained an interest in possible links between fish or other aquatic life and earthquakes. Residents along the Sanriku coast, for example, reported unusually large fish catches prior to the great tsunamis of 1896 and 1933, which some writers regarded in retrospect as precursors (*zenchō* 前兆) to these seismic events.² A 1932 *Yomiuri shinbun* article announced that Tōhoku University professor Hatai Shinkishi 畑井新喜司 had demonstrated that when catfish swim in a certain way, an earthquake occurs within twelve hours. Supposedly, the fish in his lab had predicted almost 100 earthquakes.³ A recent newspaper article pointed out that unusually large squid catches preceded several major earthquakes between 1946 and 2011, implying a possible causal link.⁴

The Great East Japan Earthquake of 11 March 2011 helped revive the problematic claim that “since ancient times” Japanese have regarded a giant underground catfish as the cause of earthquakes.⁵ Metaphoric links between catfish and earthquakes, however, did not become widespread until the late seventeenth century at the earliest, and there is no evidence of widespread literal belief that a giant catfish caused the earth to shake. Indeed, at least until about 1856, when some doubts began to appear, earthquakes were convincingly explained as the result of yang energy trapped within the earth seeking to escape upward. The giant catfish became an increasingly popular symbol of earthquakes during the nineteenth century, and the profusion of catfish prints (*namazu e* 鯰絵) following the 1855 Ansei Edo Earthquake was the most dramatic manifestation of that symbolism.⁶

Taking the catfish prints as a starting point and generally moving backward in time, this essay examines the origins and iconographic roots of the earthquake catfish. This process sheds light on aspects of premodern Japanese religion, including Daoism (broadly defined), “moot deities,” and geographically based grids or networks of religious power.⁷ Focusing on the flow, distribution, and regulation of divine power, I argue that conceptions of religious power in premodern Japan resembled a modern electrical power grid. Cosmic energy flows through the grid via lines of transmission consisting of waterways, lakes, rivers, seas, and underground rivers or pipes. The relays and substations consisted of mountains and mountain-like islands, often imagined to resemble jars or gourds. These substations provided access to liminal zones and typically contained transformers that regulated the voltage of raw cosmic power, reducing it to a level suitable to human society. One example of such transformers would be foundation stones (*kaname ishi* 要石), the one at Hitachi’s Kashima

2 Yoshimura 2004, pp. 16–20, 81–82.

3 *Yomiuri shinbun* 1932a. See also excerpts of a presentation Hatai gave on his research, *Yomiuri shinbun* 1932b. After summarizing the scientific data ca. the mid 1990s, Rikitake Tsuneji concludes that the idea of fish as earthquake predictors is “not absurd,” and should be considered in future research on earthquake prediction. See Rikitake 1995, p. 153.

4 *Yomiuri Online* 2011.

5 Mitchell 2011. This article contains several factual errors, including the attribution of a poem about the Foundation Stone and the contestants in the 1600 Battle of Sekigahara. Regarding the link between earthquakes and catfish in Japan, De Boer and Sanders claim that records of earthquakes in Japan “have been kept faithfully since 481 AD, a time when seismic events were thought to be caused by the wriggling of a gigantic catfish that lived in the sea beneath Japan and supported the islands on its back.” De Boer and Sanders 2005, pp. 172–73.

6 Regarding the catfish prints, see Ludwin and Smits 2007; Smits 2006; Smits 2009a; and Smits 2009b.

7 Teeuwen and Rambelli, using the Chinese cult of the Pole Star as a typical example, use the term “moot deities,” as a miscellaneous category for entities that were neither native Japanese *kami* nor officially part of the Buddhist pantheon. Teeuwen and Rambelli 2003, pp. 24–29.

Shrine 鹿島神宮 being but the most famous of many.⁸ Transmission between relays in the network was commonplace, and local deities based at the substations managed the system.

There was not a single, definitive divine power grid, nor did most Japanese imagine power grids in an identical manner. Instead, what I describe is a general approach to apprehending divine power. Moreover, I argue that the tendency to imagine divine power as flowing through a regulated geographic network derived, at least in substantial part, from Chinese conceptions that gradually became known as Daoism. It has long been common in studies of Japanese religion to acknowledge the fluid boundaries between “Shinto” and Buddhism under the general rubric of *honji suijaku* 本地垂迹 (original ground, manifest traces). This paper moves beyond a narrow definition of *honji suijaku*, expanding the scope of combinatory possibilities to include powerful entities that were neither native kami nor part of the Buddhist pantheon.⁹ The earthquake catfish of the 1855 prints is one such example, and an exploration of its origins reveals a set of interrelated topics connected with the flow of divine power. These topics include the “mandalization of space,”¹⁰ floating islands, especially Penglai 蓬莱 and its Japanese replications like Chikubushima 竹生島,¹¹ the Chinese *ao* (a mythical hybrid sea creature that could resemble a giant fish 鰲 or a giant turtle 鼈), Urashima-based legends, gourds,¹² liminal zones, and waterways. In some respects, this essay is an update and extension of Cornelius Ouwehand’s 1964 book, *Namazu-e and their Themes*, in which he took key iconographic themes from these prints as starting points to describe a network of folk religion.¹³ My approach is similar, albeit more narrowly focused on the interrelated topics of the origins of the earthquake catfish and conduits of divine power.

Basic Iconographic Elements of the Catfish Prints

The majority of the catfish prints depict what we might call the Foundation Stone catfish image, characteristic of the Kantō region. In such prints, the basic image is the Kashima deity (Kashima daimyōjin 鹿島大明神) pressing down on the Kashima Shrine’s Foundation Stone to suppress a giant catfish. A few of the 1855 prints, however, featured the gourd catfish (*hyōtan namazu* 瓢箪鯰) found in *Ōtsu e* 大津絵, quasi-religious, inexpensive images marketed to travelers on the Tōkaidō in and around Ōtsu on the shores of Lake Biwa. The basic image in these *Ōtsu e* features a catfish pinned down by a large bottle gourd.¹⁴ The

8 Kitani Makoto explains that in some contexts the Kashima Foundation Stone served to close off a wind tunnel connected to another land, and that its occasional loosening served to promote a type of large-scale religious festival/ritual (*shukusai* 祝祭), in which cities and people died and then were reborn via the resulting earthquake. Kitani 1984, p. 76.

9 Many of the essays in Teeuwen and Rambelli 2003 regard *honji suijaku* as the basis of a combinatory logic in which *kami*, entities in the Buddhist pantheon, and an array of moot deities combine in various ways to augment each other’s power.

10 This mandalization was a process whereby Shingon Buddhists superimposed the main diagrammatic elements of the Diamond and Womb mandalas onto geographical features “to produce natural mandalas, sacred spaces for the practice and realization of Buddha hood.” The first two “mandalized places were the Yoshino (diamond) and Kumano (womb) areas of the Kii peninsula. Other spaces in the Japanese islands subsequently underwent mandalization, contributing to the notion of Japan as a divine land (*shinkoku*).” See Grapard 1982, especially pp. 210–20. In subsequent publications, Grapard has expanded on this basic insight, applying it to specific cases and adding analysis of time and ritual to that of space.

11 For detailed studies of Chikubushima, see Shimao 1995 and Watsky 2004.

12 Regarding the significance of gourd spaces in Chinese geographical imagination, see Nakano 1991.

13 Ouwehand 1964.

14 Kitahara 2003, pp. 310–11.



Figure 1. Typical catfish prints from 1855. At left the Kashima deity pins down the earthquake catfish with the foundation stone (*kaname ishi*). At right, he uses a bottle gourd, reflecting iconographic elements from *Ōtsu e*. Source: Miyata and Takada 1995, pp. 20, 107.

Foundation Stone catfish was a later derivation from the gourd catfish. The geographic roots of these images in Japan is the Lake Biwa area, especially in connection with Chikubushima, a small island in the northern part of the lake.

An additional source for some of the iconographic elements in the 1855 prints was *Ise goyomi* 伊勢暦 (*Ise calendar*), which featured a serpentine dragon encircling the islands of Japan, its head and tail nailed together by a sword. This creature was sometimes called the *jishin mushi* 地震虫 (earthquake insect or caterpillar), and the first extant example purportedly dates from 1198. However, because the next extant image of a similar nature was produced in 1624, it is likely that this “1198” illustrated calendar was a forged product of the Tokugawa period.¹⁵ These *Ise goyomi* and earthquake maps were a subset of a broader genre of *Gyōki* maps (*Gyōkizu* 行基図), which tended to compress the provinces of Japan into a relatively straight line, sometimes with the whole country resembling a single-pronged *vajra*. Two examples from 1624 and ca. 1625 contain earthquake divination information for each month (and sometimes half month), written between the dorsal fins of the dragon-fish hybrid encircling Japan. *Ise goyomi* and earthquake maps were produced between 1624 and 1685, and the serpentine creature encircling Japan was identified variously as a giant fish (including the Buddhist *makara*), a dragon, and a catfish.¹⁶ A second type of *ōzassho* 大雑書 (almanac) earthquake maps appeared in the early nineteenth century. They featured a more realistic depiction of Japan, and some included earthquake divination information. The

¹⁵ Kitahara 2003, p. 310 and Unno 1994b, p. 76 (note).

¹⁶ Unno 1994b, pp. 68–77. For more details on earthquake divination in these images, see Unno 2005, pp. 219–22, 251 (n. 15). For a broader discussion, see Hashimoto 1983, pp. 49–54.

creature in the *ōzassho* maps is similar to that of the *Ise goyomi*.¹⁷ The appearance of gourds, hybrid creatures, the image of a giant creature underneath or encircling a land mass, and several other iconographic features of the 1855 catfish prints have a long history, with roots in Japanese folk religion. In many cases, these roots extend to China.

Origins of Japan's Earthquake Catfish

Geographically, the notion of a giant subterranean catfish whose movements are capable of shaking the surface of the earth developed in around Lake Biwa and later spread to the Kantō region. Its ultimate roots are in China, a point some Japanese scholars have long known. In a wide-ranging discussion of earthquake lore in 1828, for example, Koizumi Sonoaki 小泉其明 pointed out that morphologically the Chinese *ao* was the ancestor of Japan's earthquake catfish.¹⁸ Moreover, both *ao* and catfish were interchangeable with dragons, serpents, turtles and other creatures in many contexts. In a typical example, two lines of verse inserted sideways into a brief account of the 1707 Hōei Earthquake 宝永地震 speak of a giant serpent emerging to cause the great earthquake.¹⁹ Japan's catfish likely made its first explicit appearance in 1592, but the earthquake and catfish link was uncommon until the late seventeenth century. Early in the eighteenth century, real catfish began to appear in the rivers and lakes of the Kantō region.²⁰

The first prominent appearance of a catfish in Japanese art or literature was probably Josetsu's 如拙 1413 *Hyōnenzu* 瓢鮎図, an enigmatic painting-poetry set that is the locus classicus of the gourd catfish. For well over a century after *Hyōnenzu*'s creation, the association between gourds and catfish was infrequent. A 1540 poem by Arakida Moritake 荒木田守武 connected gourds and catfish, but collections of linked verse from around this time indicate that "*namazu*," was not a distinct category, nor did the word appear directly after "*hyōtan*."²¹ In *tsukeaigo shū* 付合語集, dictionary-like aids in the composition of haikai 俳諧, "*hyōtan*" does not appear under the entry "*namazu*" until 1669.²² About a decade later, the gourd catfish began to appear in the repertoire of *Ōtsu e*. The first appearance of the gourd catfish in popular literature was in Chikamatsu Monzaemon's 近松門左衛門 1708 *Keisei hangonkō* 傾城反魂香.²³ Within the genre of *Ōtsu e*, the gourd catfish underwent a three-stage evolution from playful and satirical, to a vehicle for conveying moral lessons (early eighteenth century), to a talismanic amulet to protect against floods and other water-related problems (early nineteenth century), but not earthquakes.²⁴ By the early nineteenth century, catfish had become associated with earthquakes in genres other than *Ōtsu e*. A book describing an 1819 earthquake that shook the eastern shore of Lake Biwa, for example, features a gourd catfish on the cover. By the 1850s, several gourd catfish appeared in the Kantō area in connection with events such as the 1853 Odawara Earthquake 小田原地震 and the 1854 Ansei Nankai 安政南海 and Tōkai 東海 Earthquakes.²⁵

17 Unno 1994b, pp. 75–81.

18 "Chōshin hiroku, gekan" 懲震誌録下巻 in NRJSS 2005, p. 238.

19 "Kumano nendaiki" 熊野年代記 in NRJSS 2002, p. 87.

20 Kitahara 2003, esp. pp. 283, 293–294 and Miyata 1995, pp. 27–28.

21 Shimao 1995, p. 52.

22 Kitani 1995, p. 53.

23 Suehiro 1995, p. 182.

24 Suehiro 1995, p. 184 and Ouwehand 1964, pp. 43–50. For additional details regarding catfish as harbingers or predictors of floods in Japanese folklore, see Miyata 1972, pp. 160–61.

25 Kitahara 2003, pp. 310–12.

The association between earthquakes, catfish, and Kashima's Foundation Stone can also be traced in haikai dictionaries. In a 1645 example, "Kashima" and "pheasant" (*kiji* 雉) appear under "*jishin*," but none of the other associations common in the 1855 prints were present. "Pheasant" appears because it was still common during the early seventeenth century to imagine the Kashima Shrine as suppressing or calming a giant pheasant, whose movements cause the earth to shake. By 1645, "Chikubushima" also appears under the entry "*namazu*." By 1656, "*yurugu*" 揺るぐ (to shake) included "*jishin*" and "Kashima *kaname ishi*," and the same association can be found in a 1661 dictionary. By 1669, the web of symbols had expanded significantly. The item "*jishin*" was associated with "the presence of the dragon deity (*ryūjin no sankai* 竜神の参会)" and "Kashima." The entry "*namazu*" was associated with "*jishin*" and "*hyōtan*." The same associations are found in a dictionary from 1676, which also contains a note explaining that a giant catfish supports the land of Japan on its back. In short, the notion of a giant subterranean catfish as the cause of earthquakes began to spread during the latter half of the seventeenth century.²⁶

Other evidence complements this conclusion. Earthquake maps of Japan produced during the middle of the seventeenth century promoted the metaphor of a "*namazu*" (even though shaped like a dragon or caterpillar) causing earthquakes. If the association of catfish and earthquakes began to take root late in the seventeenth century, we would expect academic discourse to address the topic soon thereafter. In 1715, Nishikawa Joken 西川如見 took up the matter as part of a larger discussion of earthquakes. He speculated that because fish were yang creatures living in a yin environment, they were a suitable symbol for the causal mechanism of earthquakes. Joken also stressed the metaphoric nature of the catfish-earthquake connection, declaring literal belief in this lore to be "far from correct principles (*seiri* 正理)."²⁷ By the early nineteenth century, the link between catfish and earthquakes had been widely discussed in earthquake literature, albeit as a curious item of folklore and not as a serious explanation of earthquake mechanics.

Two poems, one in 1676 and one in 1678, by Matsuo Bashō 松尾芭蕉 reflect early links between catfish and earthquakes. The latter poem reads:

寂滅の貝ふき立る初嵐

Jakumetsu no kai fukitateru hatsu arashi

The early storm, blaring its conch-shell horn of destruction,

石こづめなる山本の雲

Ishi kozume naru yamamoto no kumo

The cloud at the base of the mountain raining down stones.

大地震つづいて竜やのぼらん

Daijishin tsuzuite ryū ya noboruran

The great earthquake continues, the dragon rises.

長十丈の鯰なりけり

Naga jūjō no namazu narikeri

It was a *namazu* ten *jō* in length.²⁸

26 Kitani 1995, pp. 52–54 and Kitahara 2003, pp. 305–306.

27 Nishikawa 1715, vol. 5, page faces 12–14 after the heading "*Jishin*."

28 Quoted in Musha 1995, p. 15.

The first two lines refer to a common belief that earthquakes were essentially the same phenomenon as thunder, occurring beneath the earth's surface. This association of thunder and storms with earthquakes continued well into the twentieth century. The dragon in the third line transformed into a catfish in the fourth, the two creatures being interchangeable. Moreover, in Buddhist-influenced earthquake divination, the dragon deity was one of four entities that could cause earthquakes.²⁹

The notion of a centipede-like dragon that causes earthquakes had transformed into an earthquake-causing catfish by the late seventeenth century in the Lake Biwa area. One illustration is an image of Ōbora Benten 大洞弁天 in Hikone, built in 1695 for protection against natural disasters. It features several catfish carved near the image of Benten.³⁰ This juxtaposition also points to Lake Biwa as geographical origin of the association of catfish and earthquakes.

Toyotomi Hideyoshi 豊臣秀吉 was probably the first prominent figure to link catfish and earthquakes in writing. In a 1592 directive concerning the construction of Fushimi castle, he ordered it built to withstand “any type of great *namazu* event.” Hideyoshi had close ties with Chikubushima and was surely familiar with the revised version of the *Chikubushima engi* 竹生島縁起, in which a giant catfish supports the island. It would have been only a small logical step to imagine that the movement of this catfish would cause the land to shake.³¹ The revised version of the *Chikubushima engi* dates from the early fifteenth century, approximately the same time as *Hyōnenzu's* production. This revision was part of a broader process in medieval times of revamping legends in local *engi* to facilitate soliciting donations.³² The *Chikubushima engi* is the most likely source not only of Hideyoshi's linkage of catfish and earthquakes but also of Englebert Kaempfer's 1692 remark that Japanese regard earthquakes as caused by a giant whale moving about underground. Kaempfer also claimed that Chikubushima was the site of Japan's first Buddhist temple and was one of several sacred areas that did not experience earthquakes.³³

We have seen that the earliest extant haikai dictionaries associated Chikubushima and catfish. Later images of a giant catfish pinned down by Kashima's Foundation Stone replicate in microcosm the visual motif of a small island atop the back of a giant catfish. An example is a picture scroll from 1793 depicting the Kanda 神田 festival parade in Edo. It shows a giant catfish float pulled, pushed, and otherwise attended by fifty-seven people. Atop the head of the catfish is a replica of the Kashima Shrine's Foundation Stone that also resembles the profile of Chikubushima.³⁴ Chikubushima was powerful place, thought to be a Japanese version of Penglai, the mythical island of the immortals off the coast of Shandong.

There is abundant evidence pointing to China as the ultimate source for images of a deity or immortal riding on a giant fish. Several Chan (Zen) temples, for example, feature a Fish Basket Guanyin (Yulan Guanyin 魚籃觀音), atop a giant fish whose appearance was similar to

29 The others were the “golden-winged bird,” probably connected with the pheasant-earthquake link in Japanese folklore, the fire (or hearth) deity, and the celestial king (also known as Taishakuten 帝釈天). Hashimoto 1983, p. 50 and Unno 2005, pp. 222, 251 (n. 15).

30 Usami 1979, pp. 39–40.

31 Kitahara 2003, pp. 307–308 and Watsky 2004, esp. pp. 65–100.

32 Shimao 1995, pp. 66, 68 and Watsky 2004, pp. 50–51.

33 Kitahara 2003, pp. 308–309.

34 Kuroda 1993, pp. 160–61 and Kitahara 2003, pp. 310–11.

the giant catfish of later Japanese folklore.³⁵ Local legend connected with the Lingyin Temple 靈隱寺 in Hangzhou (Zhejiang province) explains the protective function of the area's Fish Basket Guanyin as preventing earthquakes by suppressing a giant fish whose movements shake the earth.³⁶ Depictions of Daoist immortals riding atop giant shrimp, dragons, fish, or hybrids of these animals circulated as stock images throughout the years of the Qing dynasty and probably earlier. Particularly striking is a depiction of Iron Crutch Li, (Li Tieguai 李铁拐) standing on the head of a fish that closely resembles a giant catfish. Symbolized by his iron crutch and bottle-gourd, the Li of this image is nearly identical to Japanese images of people or monkeys in the *Ôtsu e* or of deities in the *namazu e* suppressing catfish with bottle gourds.

Fish Basket Guanyin was related to Chinese myths and legends concerning the *ao* or *aoyu*, a hybrid creature typically depicted as resembling either a sea turtle or a giant catfish.³⁷ The Daoist classic *Liezi* 列



Figure 2. Daoist immortal Li Tieguai. Doré 1938.

子 describes five mountainous islands of immortals, of which Penglai is most famous, floating in the ocean on the backs of giant turtles.³⁸ Along these lines, Ouwehand points out that:

In the Chinese sources of the great tradition . . . it is the sea monster *ao* (*ngao*) which carries on its back the Isles of the Immortals . . . This must have been the reason why the Chinese Zen priest Tung-kao, commemorating his visit to the Kashima shrine in 1684, refers in a poem on the kaname-ishi to 'the stone that calms down the *ao*.'³⁹

The main point here is that China is the origin of notions such as giant subterranean fish causing the ground to shake, floating islands supported by giant aquatic creatures, and images of deities or immortals riding atop fish resembling giant catfish.

Another striking Chinese example of an *ao* closely resembling the catfish of the later Japanese prints is an anthropomorphic depiction of the chief star of the Big Dipper (Ch. Kuixing, Jp. Kaisei 魁星) standing atop a giant fish. One version of this depiction replaces

35 For images of Fish Basket Kannon, see: <http://teachartwiki.wikispaces.com/Gyoran+Kannon-Katsushika+Hokusai>

36 Kojima 1995, pp. 186–87.

37 Kojima 1995, pp. 187–88.

38 Graham 1990, p. 97.

39 Ouwehand 1964, p. 39, n. 3.

the fish with the character *ao*, thus making its identity certain. This notion of deities or people of remarkable accomplishments standing atop the head of the *ao* can be found in other contexts. For example, during the Tang and Song dynasties, there was an image of an *ao* carved into slate on a pavilion near the imperial palace. Those who passed the highest civil service exam would assemble there in a manner whereby they “occupied the head of the *ao*.”⁴⁰

The image of a deity riding atop a *namazu*-like fish made its earliest Japanese appearance in the region around Lake Biwa.⁴¹ Benzaiten 弁才天 was a Buddhist divinity based on the Hindu goddess Sarasvatī, who became associated in the *honji suijaku* manner with the indigenous female deity who created Chikubushima. Associated with serpentine creatures, Benzaiten became Chikubushima’s principle deity. Not only was Benzaiten associated with both Penglai and Chikubushima, she was associated with dragons and catfish. A yellow catfish that lives in the lake became Benzaiten’s messenger.⁴² This messenger function was a major motif in catfish-related folklore around bodies of water throughout Japan. Typical accounts would describe a catfish as speaking to humans or turning into human form to communicate some kind of warning to people.⁴³ The ability to warn of impending natural disasters or social upheavals, especially floods and outbreaks of disease, was a characteristic of catfish in Japanese folk belief during the centuries before the fish became specifically associated with earthquakes.

From the above discussion, it should be clear that contents of the 1855 catfish prints were in part the products of several centuries of development whereby different entities, originally independent of each other, transformed and combined. The nineteenth century earthquake catfish is an excellent example of the combinatory process in Japanese religion.⁴⁴ A closer



Figure 3. Anthropomorphic depiction of the chief star of the Big Dipper. The character *ao* resembles a giant fish. Source: Ma 1996, p. 115.

40 Ma 1996, pp. 114–16.

41 Kojima 1995, p. 189.

42 Shimao 1995, p. 67.

43 Miyata 1995, pp. 24–26; Miyata 1968, p. 40; and Ouwehand 1964, pp. 72–79. Eels (*unagi* 鰻) also functioned as messenger fish (*mono iu sakana* 物言う魚). For details, see Miyata 1972, pp. 158–59.

44 Teeuwen and Rambelli 2003, esp. pp. 42–53, 145–76.

examination of the elements connected with the earthquake catfish reveals important points about medieval and early modern approaches to supernatural power in Japan.

Powerful Islands

Replication of powerful sites was common practice in medieval and early modern Japan. For example, the potency of Chikubushima was so great that the Tokugawa bakufu created a small-scale model of it in Edo, as I discuss later. The basic tale of Chikubushima's creation in the original 931 *engi* was that a struggle between two deities caused foam to coagulate, creating the island's rocky shoreline. Wind-borne dust accumulated on that foundation, and fish piled up rocks beneath it. Birds scattered seeds about the island, and bamboo was the first plant to grow there, hence the name Chikubu ("bamboo" plus "grow"). Variations in the island's creation tale found in the two versions of its *engi* result in two different views of Chikubushima's geological structure. In the first view, the wandering monk Gyōki 行基 (668–749) explained that this island had emerged from the Gold Layer, (*konrinzai* 金輪際), the uppermost of the three layers beneath the ground in Buddhist metaphysics.⁴⁵ In Gyōki's explanation, Chikubushima was an outcropping of an otherworldly realm via its connection to the Gold Layer. The other view of Chikubushima is quite different: the island floats in the lake with no connection to the earth. In its floating iteration, Chikubushima closely resembles the creation myth of the Japanese islands whereby Izanagi 伊邪那岐 and Izanami 伊邪那美 dipped their jewel spear into the brine, and the coagulated drops formed Onogoroshima 淤能碁呂島. Indeed, the relationship between Chikubushima and Lake Biwa is analogous to that of the Japanese islands and the ocean.⁴⁶

Significantly, the floating Chikubushima was associated with giant catfish and elongated, serpentine dragons. In the original version of the *engi*, a dragon wrapped itself around the island's base seven times and then bit its tail. This dragon was originally a catfish, and in the *engi*, dragons, snakes, and catfish are interchangeable. These creatures protect the island and were the ancestors of Benzaiten.⁴⁷ This description of Chikubushima may have been the origin of the various maps of Japan encircled by a serpentine dragon discussed earlier. The creatures in such maps resemble the *makara* of Indian Buddhist folklore, a giant whale-like fish often shown encircling the world.⁴⁸ Many such maps became specifically associated with explanations of earthquakes during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Lake Biwa is home to a particularly large species of catfish, the Biwako *ōnamazu* (*Silurus biwaensis*) 琵琶湖大鯰 and other smaller varieties. At Shōunji 松雲寺 on the north shore of Lake Biwa, there is an image of Namazu Benten 鯰弁天, who supposedly arrived there from a pond in Nara, riding on the back of a catfish.⁴⁹ Despite differences in details, the recurrence of images of catfish, dragons, or snakes encircling or supporting Chikubushima under Benzaiten's control eventually led to the association between catfish and earthquakes, and later, the notion of a deity suppressing a giant catfish.

45 Watsky 2004, p. 51 and Shimao 1995, p. 73. In traditional Buddhist cosmology, the Gold Layer is 80,000 *yojana* below sea level and is 300,020,000 *yojana* thick. The Water Layer and Wind Layer lie beneath the Gold Layer.

46 Shimao 1995, p. 68.

47 Kitahara 2003, p. 303. See also Shimao 1995, p. 67 and Watsky 2004, p. 52. One well known tale of Chikubushima recorded in the 1697 *Honchō shokkan* 本朝食鑑 is that a diver, seeking to view the legendary dragon, swam down and discovered giant catfish instead (Kitahara 2003, pp. 290–91 and Shimao 1995, p. 67).

48 Shimao 1995, p. 68.

49 Shimao 1995, p. 67.



Figure 4. Small shrines to the dragon deity (left) and to the white serpent (right) at Chikubushima near the main Benzaiten shrine.

Nearly every Japanese text discussing Chikubushima likens it to Penglai (Jp. Hōrai). One example is a conversation in the thirteenth century *Tale of the Heike* between the Taira warrior *Tsunemasa* 経正 and his attendant. When they visit Chikubushima:

The narrator remarks that “even thus must have been the appearance of Mount Hōrai,” likening Chikubushima to the mythical Chinese island of immortality, Peng Lai, one of the preeminent otherworldly islands in all East Asia. He then imparts the specific source of Chikubushima’s sacredness: “A sutra says, ‘In the world of humans, there is a lake, and in that lake, emerging from the Gold Layer, there is a crystal mountain. There Tennyō dwells.’ This was that very island.”⁵⁰

What Penglai was for the waters off China’s coast, Chikubushima was for Lake Biwa: a liminal space straddling the boundary of this world and other realms.

There are other Japanese replications of Penglai. Mt. Fuji, for example, was sometimes likened to Penglai, and the forested hill behind the Shingū 新宮 of the Asuka Shrine 阿須賀神社, which faces the mouth of the Kumano river, is called Hōraisan (Mt. Penglai).⁵¹ Especially significant are the Oki islands, which functioned as Japanese versions of Penglai and associated islands in ancient times for the residents of the Tango peninsula. Before examining this region, we need to turn our attention to gourds and gourd-shaped spaces.

50 Watsky 2004, pp. 54–55.

51 Sōda 1989, pp. 13–14.

Gourds, Jars, and Liminal Zones

Chinese texts typically referred to Penglai and the other legendary islands of the immortals as jars (*hu* 壺) or gourds (*hu* 葫). Penghu, for example, was a common alternative for Penglai. A typical Chinese conception of gourds and gourd-shaped spaces was that they could serve as passageways to other realms, or as miniature universes. Perhaps the most famous example in literature is the tale of Fei Zhangfang 費長房 of the Han dynasty, who learned from an old immortal to transport himself to otherworldly realms by entering a giant gourd/jar. The gourd/jar allowed Fei access to the network of dragon veins, conduits of *qi* (Jp. *ki* 氣) just below the earth's surface. This tale is the origin of the Daoist notion of "heaven in a jar." Tombs buried deep in the earth or caves could serve a similar function in Daoist lore.⁵²

One common Chinese description of the shape of the immortal islands was a gourd sitting atop a base.⁵³ Sometimes this base was an *ao*. This configuration corresponds to typical depictions of gourd catfish in Japan, with the *ao* as a giant catfish. In an alternative conception of the structure of immortal islands, there was a thin tube connecting the base to the gourd/jar. This connecting tube was part of a broader network of conduits of power I examine in more detail below. The stems on decorative Chinese incense burners (Ch. *boshanlu*; Jp. *hakusanro* 博山爐) in the shape of Penglai are based on the model of immortal islands interconnected via underground or underwater tunnels.⁵⁴ Whether floating or connected to a network via tunnels, Penglai and other immortal mountains and islands were powerful nodes in an imaginary power grid that connected this ordinary world with liminal zones.

The most striking difference between this world and other realms is not spatial but temporal. Tales like *Urashima Tarō* 浦島太郎 abounded in both China and Japan. In them, a male traveler or wanderer inadvertently enters the realm of immortals (*senkai* 仙界, *tōgenkyō* 桃源郷), typically by passing through a gourd-shaped space. There he becomes subject to immortal time. In this new temporal realm, the passage of a few days might equal several decades or even centuries of ordinary earthly time. After spending what seems like a relatively short period in the immortal realm, often in close association with beautiful women, the traveler seeks to return home. His hosts in the immortal realm present him with a box, package, or the like, with instructions never to open it. Then, owing to curiosity or carelessness, someone opens the forbidden container, which unleashes the full force of the time differential. The protagonist immediately dies of old age, sometimes turning to a pile of bones or dust.⁵⁵



Figure 5. Fei Zhangfang. Source: Ōmori 1992, p. 35.

52 Ōmori 1992, pp. 34–35 and Miura 1995, pp. 70–81.

53 Nakano 1991, pp. 101–105.

54 Nakano 1991, pp. 49–54 and Shimao 1995, pp. 73–74.

55 Nakano 1991, pp. 7–35, 50, 222–24. In this connection, Nakano makes the interesting point that the idea of brothels as separate realms outside of the ordinary space and time of society may have been inspired by this basic motif of men wandering into immortal realms. The earliest Chinese brothels, called “northern villages,” appeared during the Tang dynasty. Prostitutes themselves, of course, existed earlier, but they did not inhabit brothels (pp. 31–32).

This motif of visiting a different world and time flow followed by a return to the ordinary world has deep roots in Japan. From the fifth century onward, continental immigrants to the Japanese islands brought along versions of what would later become the Urashimako or Urashima Tarō tale as part of a broader Daoist-influenced lore that Shimode Sekiyo 下出積興 has termed “Penglai thought” (*Hōrai shisō* 蓬莱思想). Its traces are found throughout the *Kojiki*, *Nihon shoki*, and in widely scattered local tales. In early Japanese texts, the characters for Penglai were often glossed “Tokoyo” 常世 or “Tokoyo no kuni” 常世の国, a vaguely defined eternal land.⁵⁶ Furthermore, Penglai/Tokoyo was often associated with underworlds such as the Chinese-derived Yellow Springs (*huangquan* 黄泉), typically read “*yomi*” in early Japanese texts.⁵⁷ There is also a geographical dimension to the Urashimako tales within Japan. The earliest, pre-Taika versions were set in the Tango peninsula (in the north of modern day Kyōto fu), where even today there is an old shrine to Urashimako in nearly every locality. An analysis of key terms in these early versions complements archaeological evidence of fishing communities on the Japan Sea coast ranging from Echizen and Wakasa in present day Fukui prefecture to Izumo and the Oki islands. The Tango peninsula was the focal point of this distinctive region, which Takine Yoshiyuki 瀧音能之 calls the “Urashima cultural zone” (*Urashima bunkaken* 浦島文化圏). The Tsushima current linked the communities of this zone, for whom gazing across the sea to the distant Oki islands was like looking at a foreign land. The Yurahime 由良姫 deity of the Oki islands (Nishinoshima chō) was the female deity, often a turtle transformed into a beautiful woman, who conveyed the fisherman Urashima to the alternative temporal zone of Penglai/Tokoyo.⁵⁸ Chinese-derived notions of powerful islands and liminal zones took root in certain regions of Japan and adapted to local geographic features and circumstances.

Complementing their association with liminal zones, gourds took on broader associations of mediating between different realms. They also served as power objects (*torimono* 執物 or 取物) in *kagura* 神楽 dances. For many lowland farmers, the mountains were a realm of the mysterious, a place where humans and deities intermingled. Bottle gourds were a prominent object of mountain culture, and were the main source of water storage in many remote areas. Gourds gradually came into use in lowland communities as liquor containers, where they took on further associations with inns and other temporary abodes for travelers. Throughout all of these iterations, gourds symbolized border zones.⁵⁹ In this process, gourds became associated with the realm of water and with suppressing, warding off, or keeping at bay malevolent supernatural beings. The *Kojiki*, for example, describes a procedure to ensure the safe passage of Jingū’s 神功 expedition to Silla that involved placing ash in a gourd and then scattering it on the water from the ship. The *Nihon shoki* describes deer antlers and gourds as ideal tools for warding off *kappa* 河童, and classical Japanese literature contains similar references to gourds as defensive weapons.⁶⁰

Gourds served as the basic template for immortal islands and other potent geographic sites in ancient Chinese culture. The main characteristic of both gourds and immortal islands was that they served as passageways between the ordinary world and supernatural realms. In Japan, gourds gradually developed additional associations as power objects in folk religion.

56 Carmen Blacker discusses the spatial dimensions of Japanese mythology, locating Tokoyo horizontally across the sea and vertically under the surface. Blacker 1999, pp. 70–74.

57 Shimode 1964, pp. 98–99, 102–107; Gorai 1991, pp. 123–24; Ouwehand 1964, pp. 89–90; and Grapard 1982, pp. 200–201.

58 I have omitted many details of this analysis. For a thorough discussion, see Takine 2000, esp. pp. 7–14.

59 Iijima 1991, pp. 120–21 and LaFleur 1983, pp. 60–79.

60 Iijima 1991, pp. 124–27, 130.

Power Grids

In both China and Japan, powerful places did not exist in isolation but were nodes in interconnected networks that channeled the flow of supernatural power. Chikubushima, the other locations in Japan likened to Penglai, and the mythical Penglai itself, were part of larger networks of sacred geography. Moving from Penglai due west, one would eventually encounter Mt. Tai 泰山. There, the first Qin emperor conducted his enthronement rites in the hope of attaining immortality. He regarded Mt. Tai as the inland locus to which the power inhering in Penglai and the other offshore immortal islands flowed. Several subsequent Chinese emperors followed this precedent, most notably Han Wudi 漢武帝.⁶¹ Mt. Tai also became associated with Hades and with control over lifespan and other aspects of fate (Ch. *ming*; Jp. *mei* 命). As Buddhism established itself in Chinese society during the Tang dynasty, however, its Indian-derived realms of hell gradually separated from the Hades of Mt. Tai in popular imagination. Thereafter, Mt. Tai remained prominent in popular Daoism and folk religion, but not in Buddhism.⁶²

Moving westward from Mt. Tai across the northern plains of China, one would eventually arrive at Mt. Kunlun 崑崙山 on the western edge of the Chinese cultural zone. Sometimes depicted in maps as shaped like a gourd, Chinese from the Han dynasty onward often imagined Mt. Kunlun as a gateway to paradise and as the source of the Yellow River.⁶³ Indeed, “Kunlun” and “*hulu*” 葫蘆 (gourd) were in the same class of what linguists call K-L words in ancient Chinese, and their similarity in pronunciation reinforced their mutual association. We have seen that it was common to imagine Penglai and its associated islands as shaped like a gourd. Owing to the strong demand in classical Chinese aesthetics for parallelism, Kunlun in the extreme west reinforced the notion that there must also be a corresponding paradisiacal land at the eastern end of the realm, namely Penglai and the other floating islands off the coast of Shandong. The major nodes of the east-west geographical axis are completed with the addition of the ancient capital cities of Luoyang and Chang’an. The Yellow River served as a conduit, both literally and in terms of imagined flows of potent forces, across much of this zone.⁶⁴

In Chinese conceptions, Kunlun and Penglai framed the east-west boundaries of the main network of sacred geography. Japanese were aware of this network from at least the late Heian period.⁶⁵ Moreover, Heian era Buddhist texts often characterized certain of Japan’s sacred mountains as having come from China and thus still existing as part of the continent. Such mountains might fly or float to Japan, sometimes shaken loose from the continent by an earthquake.⁶⁶ The general Chinese framework was the starting point for extending the network of power conduits to and throughout the Japanese islands. Among the earliest moves in this direction was the common practice of associating Tokoyo with Penglai. Ouwehand points out that the word Tokoyo occurs nine times in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* and that one conception of it was “very early colored and overlapped by Chinese Taoist ideas of the land of the blessed in the middle of the sea, *kaichū senzan*, of the Chinese P’eng lai (shan).”⁶⁷

61 Nakano 1991, pp. 77–78, 106–110.

62 Nakano 1991, pp. 78–87, 111–15.

63 See, for example, *Gujin xingsheng zhi tu* 古今行勝之圖, 1555, in Harley and Woodward 1994, plate 1.

64 Nakano 1991, pp. 100–105, 120–23, 224–26 and Iijima 1991, pp. 131–34.

65 Nakano 1991, pp. 125–35.

66 Grapard 1982, pp. 218–20.

67 Ouwehand 1964, p. 89.

As Buddhism established itself in Japan, Tokoyo/Penglai also became associated with the Fudaraku 補陀落 Pure Land.⁶⁸ The eighth century *Hitachi fudoki* 常陸風土記 portrays Hitachi as Tokoyo, thereby linking the Kashima and Katori shrines with the broader grid of religious power.

The Kashima Shrine of Hitachi province is located in Kashima shi, Ibaraki prefecture. The main deity is Takemikazuchi 武甕槌, locally known as Kashima daimyōjin. Just south of the Kashima Shrine, the Tone River flows into the harbor, and on the other side of the river in Chiba prefecture is the Katori Shrine 香取神宮, whose main deity Futsunushi 経津主 is also enshrined at Kashima. For the people of Edo, Kashima was a significant locus of power that guarded the inauspicious northeast direction (*kimon* 鬼門). Long associated with transport over water, Kashima was also the point at which wealth from distant lands (Tokoyo) entered Japan.⁶⁹ Indeed, the Kashima and Katori shrines were located in roughly the same direction and at a similar remove from Edo as was Chikubushima from Kyoto.⁷⁰ Both locations were key nodes in the religious power grid and both were instrumental in guarding their capitals. Although it gradually became associated with protection against earthquakes from the seventeenth century, the Kashima Shrine traditionally performed the dual role of warding off disease and announcing the prospects for the New Year.⁷¹

The “*shima*” in Kashima reflects the shrine’s geographic environment in ancient times. Compared with today or even the Tokugawa period, originally there was more water and less land around the shrine. It appeared, therefore, to be located on an island when viewed from most perspectives.⁷² There is still a *torii* 鳥居 facing the Pacific at Akashi beach, indicating that this piece of land was a point of connection with the broader world beyond the seas, a point from which malevolent influences could be expelled and benevolent power, often symbolized as a Miroku ship or a treasure ship (*takarabune* 宝船), could enter.⁷³ Furthermore, the text of several songs connected with Kashima dances (*Kashima odori* 鹿島踊り or *Kashima no kotofure* 鹿島の事触れ), religious folk dancing sponsored by envoys from the Kashima Shrine, mention a treasure ship sailing from Kashima and traveling from harbor to harbor along the coast spreading good fortune.⁷⁴

Based on the ancient topography of the area, a divine symmetry suggestive of yin yang thought obtained between three entities, the Kashima Shrine, the Katori Shrine, and Mt. Tsukuba. The two shrines were on opposite sides of a long, narrow harbor. Looking to the northwest from the shrines, Mt. Tsukuba, appeared as if it were an island floating atop the sea. The position of the two shrines is reminiscent of two forts defend-

68 Gorai 1991, pp. 123–25.

69 Kitani 1984, p. 75 and Miyata 1968, pp. 37–38. Kitani points out that, in Tokugawa times, both of Edo’s main *akusho* 悪所 (bawdy districts), the theatre district and Yoshiwara, were situated to the northeast of Edo castle. A line drawn from Edo castle to the Kashima Shrine would pass through the two *akusho*.

70 Watsky 2004, p. 54. Katori and Kashima are slightly farther away from Edo than Chikubushima was from Kyoto. The two shrines also lay slightly more to the east of Edo compared with a line from Chikubushima to Kyoto, which would be almost exactly northeast. Katori and Kashima were not in the ideal geomantic location *vis-à-vis* Edo castle, but the geographic significance of these two powerful shrines was, of course, an afterthought in the wake of the political and military developments that caused Edo to become Japan’s de facto capital after 1600.

71 Miyata 1968, pp. 36–39 and Kitani 1984, pp. 73–74.

72 Tō 2000, pp. 63–64.

73 Tō 2000, pp. 65–66; Miyata 1968, pp. 36–38; Kitani 1984, pp. 73–74; and Ouwehand 1964, pp. 63–65.

74 Miyata 1968, pp. 37–38 and Kitani 1984, p. 74.

ing the approach to the mountain, which is famous for its twin peaks and the *reisui* 霊水 (spirit water) from the stream flowing down from them. The “Gate of Heaven” (*ama no to* 天の戸) in ancient texts was the waterway between the two shrines.⁷⁵ The sacred geography of the Kashima-Katori shrine area bore many resemblances to that of Chikubushima, Penglai, and the Urashima cultural zone along the Japan Sea coast. Indeed, an old term for Kashima was Kameshima 甕島, or “jar island.”⁷⁶ Of course, Kameshima is also a homonym for “turtle island.”

The Tokugawa bakufu appropriated this religious power to help defend Edo. It supported the Kashima and Katori shrines and replicated Lake Biwa, Chikubushima, and Mt. Hiei in Edo. Mt. Hiei appeared as Tōeizan 東叡山 (“Eastern Hiei”) in Ueno, and Chikubushima appeared nearby in Shinobazu pond. According to a 1626 diary entry, nearby the new Tōeizan there “was a pond—Shinobazu pond is its name—that imitates Lake [Biwa]; [in the pond was] fabricated an island, and on that island was built a Benzaiten hall; this imitates Chikubushima.”⁷⁷ Watsky explains the broader context of this geographical mimesis:

Maps of Edo, which proliferated from the seventeenth century onward, suggest why, among the many sacred places near Kyoto, Chikubushima was chosen to be replicated. The 1689 *Edo zukan kōmoku*, *kon* (Outline map of Edo, part 1) . . . for example, shows the castle at the center, typical practice for representing the actual and conceptual heart of the city; surrounding it, in concentric rings of power, are the mansions of the various daimyo families, who each built a residence in the new capital, and enclosing this center of secular power is a great moat . . . Within this matrix, Shinobazu Pond (identified in writing) and the island home of Benzaiten are depicted clearly, indicating the religious halls and the separate islet.⁷⁸

This replication of Mt. Hiei and Chikubushima was an example of a broader pattern whereby powerful geographical sites, real or imagined, were reproduced in other locations. Such replication was the general process whereby Japanese extended networks conveying supernatural power of Chinese origin. Within Japan, these power spots and networks could be further copied and reproduced. Small-scale versions of Mt. Fuji (*Fujizuka* 富士塚), for example, appeared in many locations throughout Edo, dozens of which still exist. Eventually, over thirty famous temples and mountains from all over Japan were available in surrogate form in Edo.⁷⁹

In addition to its replication in Edo, Chikubushima was also linked to a Japan-wide network of sacred geographical sites. The *Keiran shūyōshū* 溪嵐拾葉集, a fourteenth century compilation of religious knowledge by a Mt. Hiei monk, points out under the entry “Benzaiten” that:

75 Tō 2000, p. 79. See also Grapard 1994, pp. 378–79 regarding Mt. Tsukuba as a duplication of the sacred geography of Kishima in Kyūshū.

76 Ponsonby-Fane 1937, p. 22.

77 Quoted in Watsky 2004, pp. 269–70.

78 Watsky 2004, p. 271.

79 Nenzi 2008, pp. 156–64. For examples of this duplication process in classical times, see Grapard 1994, esp. pp. 378–80.

Within Japan, how many places are there that are Pure Lands of Benzaiten? The answer, according to legend, is Tennokawa, which is deep in Yoshino . . . Itsukushima in Aki . . . and Chikubushima in Gōshū. . . . These three places, like three jewels of eloquence, are linked by an underground tunnel.⁸⁰

Recall the contradictory *engi* depictions of Chikubushima as both floating on the waters of Lake Biwa and as connected to deeper layers within the earth. Similarly, Chinese descriptions of Penglai and its associated islands inconsistently depicted them either as floating or as connected to the geographical network already discussed via underground tunnels. Depicting these islands as supported by turtles, dragons, and so forth was, to some extent, an attempt to reconcile their floating and fixed qualities.

It was also common to imagine three Kumano mountains as part of a network of sacred geography such that they were Japanese versions of the three Chinese immortal islands as well as Buddhist Pure Land paradises.⁸¹ A similar notion of geographical networks connected via caves and underground passageways pervades folk religion. Ouwehand, for example, points out with respect to the Hitachi area:

Throughout Japan, *but particularly in Ibaraki and Chiba, centering on the course of the Tone River*, there are places where in ancient times vessels could be taken as borrowed goods from holes and caves on the hills and mountains (*wanzuka*, *wankashizuka*, *wankashiyama*) or from hollows in huge rocks standing in pools or ponds (*wankashifu-chi*) and which are often supposed to be connected with the entrance to subterranean water palaces (*ryūgū*) and hidden paradisiacal villages (*kakurezato*) from which these vessels were supposed to come.⁸²

The presence of extensive networks of interconnected sacred sites throughout the Japanese islands was the broader context for moves like the Tokugawa bakufu's replication of Mt. Hiei and Chikubushima.

There are additional specific links between the area around Lake Biwa and the region of Edo and Hitachi. In the context of the Kashima deity's close connections with water and traffic over water, Ouwehand points out similarities between suppressing a catfish with the Foundation Stone and the folk religion associated with Chikubushima, namely:

the so-called *Chikubushima shrinkō*, i.e., the folk belief with respect to the goddess Benten [Benzaiten] worshipped on the island of Chikubu . . . a belief which here, as elsewhere in Japan, implies certain links with the daughter of the dragon-god of the sea. The boat festivals held in this place during the summer (6th month, 15th day), which show features similar to those of Kashima/Katori, indeed point in this direction.⁸³

80 Quoted in Watsky 2004, p. 55.

81 Gorai 1991, pp. 40–41.

82 Ouwehand 1964, p. 99, original emphasis.

83 Ouwehand 1964, pp. 71–72.

We have seen that Benzaiten was associated with serpents, dragons, and catfish. Moreover, according to legend she arrived in the Lake Biwa area from other bodies of water, in one case riding on the back of a catfish. Similarly, Takemikazuchi and Futsunushi were transferred from their Hitachi locations to the Kasuga Shrine in Nara in the early eighth century, possibly by sea.⁸⁴ Owing to their shared deities, the shrines at Kashima and Katori always maintained close ties with the Kasuga Shrine, a relationship that continues to this day.⁸⁵

The association between the earthquake catfish and the Kashima Shrine that developed during the eighteenth century was a byproduct of bakufu efforts to extend the power of Chikubushima and Mt. Hie to Edo. Bashō mentioned a catfish in two lines of verse from a 1676 *hyakuin* 百韻, a haikai or renga 連歌 sequence of 100 stanzas:

瀬戸の土菟輪際をほりぬきて
Seto no tsuchi konrinzai o horinukite
 Digging out the Gold Layer in the ground of Seto,
 弁財天に鯰ささぐる
Benzaiten ni namazu sasaguru
 The *namazu* bows to Benzaiten.⁸⁶

These lines refer to Chikubushima, with its connection to the Gold Layer. It appears that Bashō conceived of a catfish living deep within the earth in the vicinity of Chikubushima, where it was subordinate to Benzaiten. At about the same time that Bashō wrote these lines, the Kashima deity was developing a similar connection to a catfish whose movements caused the earth to shake.

Conclusions

Religion concerns itself in large part with supernatural power, and the networks discussed here in many ways resemble a modern power grid, or more precisely, a series of interconnected power grids. These grids connected most regions of Japan and extended to the western edge of China. They regulated the flow of divine or supernatural energy along bodies of water, including underground rivers, and sometimes pipes, with mountains or mountainous islands serving as substations. These substations resembled gourds or jars, and often provided access to liminal zones. Potent mountains and islands often contained the equivalent of transformers to regulate cosmic voltage. Penglai was the archetypical model for such substations. The system was managed by immortals, in the case of Penglai, or by local Japanese deities such as Kashima pressing down on the Foundation Stone.

Since the 1980s, it has become increasingly common for scholars to apply a combinatory paradigm to Japanese religion, often in the form of studies of specific cults or cultic centers.⁸⁷ The combinatory logic of Japanese religion differs from an older view that acknowledged the commingling of diverse elements but overlooked the systematic logic informing those

⁸⁴ Ouwehand 1964, pp. 58–66.

⁸⁵ Tyler 1992, pp. 57, 125.

⁸⁶ Quoted in Musha 1995, p. 15.

⁸⁷ Grapard's description of the Hachiman cult in part as a "confluent of several distinct streams" is a typical example. Grapard 1986, p. 24.

elements.⁸⁸ The conduits of power described here help illuminate at least one aspect of that logic, namely a diverse network of real or imagined geographical features managed at key nodes by deities or other supernatural forces. Teeuwen and Rambelli list a number of moot deities such as the Pole Star, foreign tutelary deities from Korea, China or India, “virtuous beings from foreign lands who had travelled to Japan to bring benefits to its people,” and “witch animals such as snakes and foxes, demons and ghosts such as the long-nosed *tengu* and phantom-like *mononoke*, deified Buddhist patriarchs and ascetics, and many more.”⁸⁹ The earthquake catfish and its other manifestations as dragons, turtles, whales, or giant caterpillars could be added to this list of powerful entities. Indeed, several of the 1855 prints clearly portray the earthquake catfish explicitly as a deity in a classical manner.⁹⁰

The networks in which various iterations of the catfish were enmeshed reveal a significant added dimension to sacred space in Japan and between Japan and China. Grapard has stressed the importance of sacred space and geographic networks in Japanese religious logic, culminating in the mandalization of space and topography, which he characterizes as “an ultimate exercise in magical manipulation” and “one of the most remarkable phenomena of medieval Japan.”⁹¹ The networks discussed in this essay expand on this understanding of the spatial dynamics of Japanese religion. Like the mandalization process, mountains were major nodes in supernatural power grids, but waterways and the powerful islands within them were equally important. Moreover, in many cases supernatural power grids possessed underground or underwater components, typically imagined as a system of pipes and sometimes imagined as large hybrid creatures supporting mountains islands. Indeed, bodies of water, including underground flows, were the main conduits of divine power, with mountains serving mainly as key regulatory nodes. The natural mandalas of Grapard’s description constituted the surface of a deeper and more complex array of networks.

This array of networks extended far beyond the shores of Japan, and many potent spaces within Japan were imagined to be replications of Chinese power spots. The present study suggests a pervasive influence of Chinese Daoism or Daoistic elements in Japanese religion, which centuries of domestication have largely obscured. These elements include potent immortal islands, the idea of underground conduits of power, and immortals such as Li Tieguai standing on the head of creatures strikingly similar Japan’s earthquake catfish. Indeed, much of the contemporary Japanese interest in “power spots” (*pawā supotto* パワー・スポット) is in part a legacy of these Daoistic roots.

The power grids described here integrate both horizontal and vertical conceptions of sacred space. In her classic study of Japanese shamanism, Carmen Blacker asked the question, “Where are we to look for this mysterious other world?” The answer began: “In Japan the vision of the other world is riddled with ambivalence . . . No sooner do we see it across the sea, removed horizontally in space, then it dives down beneath the waves or beneath the earth.”⁹² Insofar as there is a spatial dimension to ancient Japanese myths, it

88 Teeuwen and Rambelli 2003, pp. 3–6.

89 Teeuwen and Rambelli 2003, pp. 24–29.

90 See, for example Miyata and Takada 1995, pp. 222, 320. It features an image of the earthquake catfish attended by a Buddhist and Shinto priest and worshipped by those who benefitted financially from the earthquake. To view this image, see http://www.um.u-tokyo.ac.jp/publish_db/1999news/04/403/images/194.jpg. Last accessed May 9, 2012.

91 Grapard 1982, p. 207.

92 Blacker 1999, p. 69.

tended to be either vertical (from lands high above like Takamagahara to Yomi below) or horizontal (Tokoyo across the sea, with *marebito* 賓, supernatural guests arriving at the shores of this world).⁹³ Moreover, the horizontal dimension also has some verticality in that it often exists below the water's surface, for example in the form of the undersea palace of the Dragon King. Drawing on the work of Orikuchi Shinobu 折口信夫 and Yanagita Kunio 柳田国男, Blacker points out legends whereby "certain pools, lakes, caves, ancient tumuli or tombs were thought to lead downwards to the miraculous underworld of Ryūgū." Serpents guarded the watery entrances to the undersea palace, and foxes guarded the dry entrances.⁹⁴

This semi-horizontal, water-based view of the cosmos was probably the oldest stratum of Japanese belief, brought to the islands by its earliest, seafaring settlers. As some of these shore dwellers moved inland, the locus of sacred geography shifted from the sea to the mountains.⁹⁵ The power grids described here, especially floating islands, integrate both the horizontal and vertical views of the cosmos. They also link Japan with the Asian continent, at least as far west as Mt. Kunlun. The typical consumer of catfish prints in 1855, of course, was unlikely to have been aware of many or even any of the points discussed in this essay. As Ouwehand realized, however, the catfish prints are a window through which to view important, long-lasting dimensions of Japanese religious culture.

93 Blacker 1999, pp. 70–74.

94 Blacker 1999, pp. 75–78.

95 Blacker 1999, pp. 79–84.

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